

## Artist Quotes by Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh and Paul Cézanne

Lecture on "Post-Impressionism: How a Group of Misfits Changed the Rules of Engagement for Painting in the Modern Era"

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*Paul Gauguin and Vincent van Gogh reveal their respective positions on expressive color vs. color as decoration; the role of memory, imagination and abstraction vs. the importance of Nature and the model; the emphasis on feeling vs. perception; and the idea of the artist as outsider or primitive savage who needs to escape civilization.*

**Paul Gauguin to Paul Sérusier, 1888**, *Sérusier carrying Gauguin's words about the new art from Pont Aven to students at the Académie Julian (Paris,;*

How do you see this tree?

Is it really green? Use green, then, the most beautiful green on your palette. And that shadow, rather blue? Don't be afraid to paint it as blue as possible.

**Paul Gauguin**, *letter to Emile Schuffenecker from Pont Aven, 14 August 1888:*

Some advice: do not paint too much after nature. Art is an abstraction; derive this abstraction from nature while dreaming before it, and think more of the creation which will result than of nature. . .

**Paul Gauguin**, *from the manuscript "Diverses Choses," 1896-97, Tahiti:*

The Impressionists study color exclusively insofar as the decorative effect, but without freedom, retaining the shackles of verisimilitude. For them the dream landscape, created from many different entities, does not exist.

Color, being itself enigmatic in the sensations which it gives us, can logically be employed only enigmatically. One does not use color to draw, but always to give the musical sensations which flow from itself, from its own nature, from its mysterious and enigmatic interior force.

**Paul Gauguin**, *from the manuscript "Diverses Choses, 1896-97, Tahiti:*

It is better to paint from memory. Thus your work will be your own; your sensation, your intelligence and your soul will then survive the scrutiny of the amateur.

**Paul Gauguin**, *letter to van Gogh, 1888 explaining his self-portrait:*

It is the face of an outlaw, ill-clad and powerful, like Jean Valjean [protagonist of Victor Hugo's 1862 novel, *Les Misérables*]*—*with an inner nobility and gentleness. . . .As for this Jean Valjean, whom society has oppressed, cast out*—*for his love and vigor*—*is he not equally a symbol of the contemporary Impressionist painter?

**Paul Gauguin**, *letter to his wife Mette from Paris, [February 1890]:*

May the day come, perhaps very soon, when I'll bury myself in the woods of an ocean island to live on ecstasy, calmness and art. . . far from the European struggle for money. There in the silence of the beautiful tropical nights of Tahiti, I shall be able to listen to the sweet murmuring music of my heart's beating, in amorous harmony with the mysterious beings of my environment. Free at last, without money trouble, I'll be able to love, to sing and to die.

**Paul Gauguin**, *letter to J. F. Willumsen from Pont-Aven, autumn 1890:*

As for me. . . I am going soon to Tahiti, a small island in Oceania, where the material necessities of life can be had without money. . . .the Tahitians. . .happy inhabitants of the unknown paradise of Oceania, know only the sweetness of life. . . I can there devote myself to great works of art, freed from all artistic jealousies and with no need whatsoever of lowly trade.

**Paul Gauguin**, *letter to [the dealer Amboise] Vollard from Tahiti, January 1900:*

I am not a painter who copies nature*—*today less than before. With me everything happens in my exuberant imagination. . .

**Paul Gauguin**, *last letter to Charles Morice in Paris from Atuana, Marquesas Islands, April 1903:*

I am stricken to the ground, but not yet vanquished. . . I am a savage. And the civilized foresee it, for there is nothing surprising or confusing in my work except this savage-in-spite-of-myself. . . . Hence two kinds of beauty: one that results from instinct and another which would come from studying. . . .

**Vincent van Gogh**, *letter to his sister Wilhelmina from Arles, March 30, 1888:*

By intensifying *all* the colors one arrives once again at quietude and harmony. There occurs in nature something similar to what happens in Wagner's music, which, though played by a big orchestra, is nonetheless intimate.

**Vincent van Gogh**, *letter to Emile Bernard from Arles, April 1888:*

The imagination is certainly a faculty which we must develop, one which alone can lead us to the creation of a more exalting and consoling nature than the single brief glance at reality—which in our sight is ever changing, passing like a flash of lightning—can let us perceive.

A starry sky, for instance—look, that is something I should like to try to do, just as in the daytime I am going to try to paint a green meadow spangled with dandelions.

**Vincent van Gogh**, *letter to Emile Bernard from Arles, April 1888:*

Working directly on the spot all the time, I try to grasp what is essential. . . either expressed or not, but in any case *felt*—with tones which are also simplified, by which I mean that all that is going to be soil will share the same violet-like tone, that the whole sky will have a blue tint, that the green vegetation will be either green-blue or green-yellow, purposely exaggerating the yellows and blues in this case.

**Vincent van Gogh**, *letter to his brother Theo van Gogh, Arles, August 1888:*

And in a picture I want to say something comforting, as music is comforting. I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize, and which we seek to convey by the actual radiance and vibration of our coloring.

**Vincent van Gogh**, *letter to his brother Theo from Arles, c. September 1888:*

For my part I foresee that other artists will want to see color under a stronger sun, and in a more Japanese clarity of light.

Now if I set up a studio and refuge at the gates of the South [in Provence], it's not such a crazy scheme. . . And all true colorists must come to this, must admit that there is another kind of color than that of the North. I am sure if Gauguin came, he would love this country; if he doesn't it's because he has already experienced more brightly colored countries, and he will always be a friend, and one with us in principle.

**Vincent van Gogh**, *letter to his brother Theo from Arles, c. September 1888:*

I often think of [Georges] Seurat's method, though I do not follow it at all; but he is an original colorist, and [Paul] Signac too, though to a different degree, their stippling is a new discovery, and at all events I like them very much. But I myself—I tell you frankly—am returning more to what I was looking for before I came to Paris. I do not know if anyone before me has talked about **suggestive color** [emphasis added].

**Vincent van Gogh**, *letter to Emile Bernard from Arles, first half October 1888:*

I never work from memory. . . I cannot work without a model. I won't say that I don't turn my back on nature ruthlessly in order to turn a study into a picture, arranging the colors, enlarging and simplifying; but in the matter of form I am too afraid of departing from the possible and the true. . . I do not invent the whole picture; on the contrary, I find it all ready in nature, only it must be disentangled.

**Vincent van Gogh**, *letter to his brother Theo from St. Rémy, March 19, 1889:*

As far as I can judge, I am not, properly speaking, a madman. You will see that the canvases that I have done in the intervals are calm and not interior to the others. I *miss* the work more than it tires me. . . they must let me go out with him [Paul Signac] to show him my canvases.

**Vincent van Gogh**, *letter to his brother Theo from St. Rémy, November 1889:*

If I continue, I certainly agree with you that it is perhaps better to attack things with simplicity than to seek after abstractions.

**Vincent van Gogh**, *letter to Emile Bernard from St. Rémy, beginning December 1889:*

As you know, once or twice, while Gauguin was in Arles, I gave myself free rein with abstractions. . . I won't say that one might not venture on it after a virile lifetime of research, of a hand-to-hand struggle with nature, but I personally don't want to bother my head with such things. I have been slaving away on nature the whole year, hardly thinking of Impressionism or of this, that and the other. . . So I am working at present among the olive trees, seeking after the various effects. . .

What I am doing is hard, dry, but that is because I am trying to gather new strength by doing some rough work, and I'm afraid abstractions would make me soft.

*Paul Cézanne's words reveal the importance of direct contact with Nature and the model; the reduction of Nature to geometry; and how the experience of Nature is at once about retinal perception, visual sensation and the analysis of form.*

**Paul Cézanne**, *letter to Joachin Gasquet and a young friend, n.d.:*

The study of the model and its realization is sometimes very slow in coming.

**Paul Cézanne**, *letter to Charles Camoin from Aix, January 28, 1902:*

One says more and perhaps better things about painting when facing the motif than when discussing purely speculative theories. . . .

**Paul Cézanne**, *letter to Charles Camoin from Aix, February 22, 1903:*

But I must work—all things, particularly in art, are theory developed and applied in contact with nature.

**Paul Cézanne**, *letter to Charles Camoin from Aix, September 13, 1903:*

[Thomas] Couture used to say to his pupils: "Keep good company, that is: go to the Louvre. But having seen the great masters who repose there, we must hasten out and by contact with nature revive in us the instincts and sensations of art that dwell within us."

**Paul Cézanne**, *letter to Emile Bernard from Aix, April 15, 1904:*

May I repeat what I told you here: treat nature by the cylinder, the sphere, the cone, everything in proper perspective so that each side of an object or a plane is directed towards a central point. Lines parallel to the horizon give breadth, that is a section of nature or, if you prefer, of the spectacle that the *Pater Omnipotens Aeterne Deus* spreads out before our eyes. Lines perpendicular to this horizon give depth. But nature for us men is more depth than surface, whence the need of introducing into our light vibrations, represented by reds and yellows, a sufficient amount of blue to give the impression of air.

. . . You should, I think, only continue in this way. You have the understanding of what must be done and you will soon turn your back on the Gauguins and the Van Goghs!

**Paul Cézanne**, *letter to Emile Bernard from Aix, May 12, 1904:*

I am progressing very slowly, for nature reveals herself to me in very complex forms; and the progress needed is incessant. One must see one's model correctly and experience it in the right way; and furthermore express oneself forcibly and with distinction.

**Paul Cézanne**, *letter to Emile Bernard from Aix, July 25 1904:*

To achieve progress nature alone counts, and the eye is trained through contact with her. It becomes concentric by looking and working. I mean to say that in an orange, an apple, a bowl, a head, there is a culminating point; and this point is always—in spite of the tremendous effect of light and shade and colorful

sensations—the closest to our eye; the edges of the objects recede to a center on our horizon.

**Paul Cézanne**, *letter to Emile Bernard from Aix, October 23, 1905*:

...we must render the image of what we see, forgetting everything that existed before us. . . .

Now, being old, nearly 70 years, the sensations of color, which light, are the reason for the abstractions which prevent me from either covering my canvas or continuing the delimitation of the objects when their points of contact are fine and delicate; from which it results that my image or picture is incomplete. On the other hand, the planes are placed one on top of the other . . .

**Paul Cézanne**, *letter to his son Paul from Aix, September 8, 1906*:

--Finally I must tell you that as a painter I am becoming more clear-sighted in front of nature, but that with me the realization of my sensations is always very difficult....Here on the edge of the river, the motifs are very plentiful, the same subject seen from a different angle gives a subject for study of the highest interest and so varied that I think I could be occupied for months without changing my place, simply bending a little more to the right or left.

**Paul Cézanne**, on Pissarro:

I, too, have been an Impressionist. Pissarro had an enormous influence on me, but I wanted to make of Impressionism something solid and lasting like the art in a museum.

Reference: *Theories of Modern Art*, by Herschel B. Chipp, with contributions by Peter Selz and Joshua C. Taylor (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971)

*Gauguin by Himself*, edited by Belinda Thomson. (Edison, New Jersey: Chartwell Books, Inc., 1998)

*The Complete Van Gogh* by Jan Hulsker, 1977, p. 408.

*Paul Cézanne* by Joachim Gasquet, 1921. Reprinted in *The Impressionists by Themselves*, edited by Michael Howard, 1998, p. 110.